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The United States and Vietnam: 1975-1987

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Analyses of US policy toward Vietnam since the fall of Saigon have centered on the influence of three factors: residual bitterness: the "China card"; and the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. Important in varying degrees as these factors have been, however, they need to be considered in the broader context of major changes in the American perspective on East and Southeast Asia beginning in the late sixties well before the Communist victory in Indochina. Of these changes as they related specifically to Southeast Asia, one was a much diminished concern with the region as the source of major strategic threats to US interests. A second, coming a good deal later, was the substitution of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) for Vietnam as the focus of American policy interest in the region. It is this changed perspective that provides the rationale for the very limited role the United States has played in the Third Indochina War, a role that has constricted US leverage but otherwise has thus far served American interests well. Of major consequence in laying the foundation for this altered perspective was the American rapprochement with the Peoples Republic of China, itself vastly facilitated by the Sino-Soviet split and Chinese concern with the progress of US-Soviet detente. But also of considerable significance were evolutionary trends in non-Communist Southeast Asia toward national integration and regional cooperation. Changed relations among the great powers undermined the argument that massive American involvement in Indochina was required to contain Sino-Soviet expansionism; regional developments cast increasing doubt on the validity of the domino theory.



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The Nixon Doctrine of July 1969 is remembered primarily for its confirmation of plans for complete US troop withdrawal from Vietnam and the limits it placed on future US military participation in the defense of Asian allies and friends. Less noted was its implicit abandonment of the domino theory. At Guam, in terms that have since become part of the litany of Republican and Democratic administrations alike, Nixon emphasized the strengths not the weaknesses of non-Communist Asia. As his successors have done, he stressed record economic ^{growth} rates in Southeast Asia and the decline of the Marxist doctrinal appeal as Communist countries fell behind economically. He also pointed to the limits "Red China's" internal problems were placing on its ability to export revolution.

Within two years, "Red Chinese" expansionism was joining the domino theory on the road to elimination from the official American array of threat perceptions in Southeast Asia. Thus, in October 1970, even though the US invasion of Cambodia had put a temporary end to US/PRC talks, Assistant Secretary of State Marshall Green in testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Relations, declared that the PRC was "...not today considered to pose a juggernaut type threat to its neighbors." Granting continued concerns among China's smaller neighbors, he said "Nevertheless the nature of the threat on China's periphery is less direct than many supposed it earlier to be and the capacity of others to deal with the threat, especially among China's non-Communist neighbors, is generally greater than in the '50s." [1]

With both radically altered threat perceptions and rapidly declining prospects for American public support for further large investments in an effort merely to preserve South Vietnam's independence, the maintenance of US credibility became the administration's major justification for continued American participation in Indochina hostilities. Thus, in March 1975, pressed by congressional questioners to explain the need for maintaining the flow of arms and assistance to Indochina, Assistant Secretary of State Philip Halab responded "We no longer see the security of the United States as directly, immediately at issue. Nevertheless, it remains true that failure to sustain our purposes in Indochina would have a corrosive effect on our ability to conduct effective diplomacy worldwide." [2]

In the war's aftermath, a new vision of a power balance in East Asia favorable to US interests and of a more "mature" relationship with an increasingly prosperous, stable, and cohesive ASEAN was enshrined in President Gerald Ford's Pacific Doctrine and other public statements. It was not, however, reflected in the formulation of any new and comprehensive policy toward Southeast Asia. Nor was the decline in attention to Indochina reflected in correspondingly increased attention to non-Communist Southeast Asia. Such interest as Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger retained was not in Southeast Asia itself but in how American policy there would enhance or reduce what he saw as badly-damaged American credibility worldwide. The Mavaguez rescue effort was a case in point. No thought was given to the impact of a military action mounted in disregard of

Thai sovereignty on relations with Bangkok; instead, the focus was on demonstrating that the United States could not be challenged with impunity and would not hesitate to use military power to defend its interests.

Similar considerations lay behind policies pursued with respect to SEATO and the large American military presence in Thailand. With the war over and detente with the PRC well under way, the US now had no interest in perpetuating either. But it was the administration's hope that the dissolution of SEATO and the withdrawal from Thailand could be accomplished in ways that would not suggest either that the United States was being forced out of the region or that it was abandoning its responsibilities. The resumption of negotiations over the Philippine base agreement also reflected, among other factors, this preoccupation with credibility. Thus, responding to doubts concerning the defense relationship expressed by Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos and others, Kissinger declared in June 1975 "We will permit no question to arise about the firmness of our treaty commitments. Allies who seek our support will find us constant. At the same time, if any partner seeks to modify these commitments, we will be prepared to accomodate that desire." [3]

With damage limitation the principal preoccupation, no broad concept of the future American role in Southeast Asia emerged from higher levels beyond an intermittent interest in a more active relationship with Indonesia based on its potential as a "regional influential." Indeed inattention was so great as at times even to hamper the conduct of day to day business. This was notably the case

in the troop withdrawal negotiations with Thailand, where instability at the working level in Washington to obtain attention for necessary decisions and negotiating instructions posed serious problems for American representatives in Bangkok.

Significant pressures from below for some new comprehensive approach to Southeast Asia were also lacking. Day to day operational tasks--receiving and resettling large numbers of refugees, disposing of military equipment en route to Indochina, negotiating with Thailand, trying to sustain a modicum of congressional support for continued assistance--were even more absorbing than usual. At the working level, moreover, there was real confidence in the resilience of the ASEAN countries, in the likelihood that they would recover fairly rapidly from the shock effects of the Communist victory in Indochina, and that they would, in fact, benefit from reduced American paternalism if this were not carried to the point of complete neglect.

Whatever the limits of policy planning, the unavoidable business of government nevertheless required continued attention to the region by those operationally responsible. Such daily pressures, of course, were not felt on the Hill or among the general public. There, the desire to forget Vietnam tended to extend to all of Southeast Asia. In Congress, attitudes toward Southeast Asia in general were expressed in the form of aid cuts. Particular--and negative--concerns were focused on human rights problems in the Philippines.

The desire to forget, of course, applied with particular force to the question of future relations with Vietnam. Prospects for offshore oil exploration and trade aroused some limited interest in business circles in normalizing relations with Hanoi. Otherwise, there was no significant constituency pressing for such action or even expressing interest in the possibility. Moreover, to the extent that residual bitterness was an important barrier to normalization, it was intensified by Hanoi's insistence that the United States was obliged under the Paris Agreement to supply substantial amounts of aid and by Vietnamese unwillingness to discuss procedures for providing an accounting of Americans listed as missing in action (MIA) without a prior US acknowledgement of this obligation.

Bitterness was certainly a factor in administration policy. The "peace with honor" that Nixon had announced on January 3, 1973 and for which Kissinger had been awarded the Nobel Prize had proved to be anything but. For this, in administration eyes, the blame lay with Congress and with Hanoi. Thus, the terms in which, in June 1975, Kissinger announced American intentions seemed hardly promising. "New regimes have come to power in Asia in the last few months," he said. "They have flouted international agreements and flagrantly violated international standards and that we cannot ignore. But we are prepared to look to the future. Our attitude toward them will be influenced by their conduct toward their neighbors and their attitude toward us." [4] In September 1976, as the Ford administration drew to a close, Assistant Secretary of State Arthur Hummel's congressional testimony indicated little change. Still emphasizing

that the United States was looking to the future not the past, he added. " For us the most serious single obstacle in proceeding toward normalization is the refusal of Hanoi to give us a full accounting of those missing in action. Hanoi for its part continues to demand economic assistance under the Paris agreement. We believe that the Paris agreement was so massively violated by Hanoi that we have no obligation to provide assistance, and in any case Congress has prohibited such assistance by law." [5]

Meanwhile, the embargo, which had been extended on May 16, 1975 to all of Vietnam and Cambodia from its wartime application to the Communist-controlled area, remained in force as did the freeze on South Vietnamese assets in the United States. In 1975 and again in November 1976 the United States vetoed Hanoi's application for membership in the United Nations, on the latter occasion with specific reference to the MIA issue. Antagonism aroused by Hanoi's demands also dominated congressional action: the Foreign Assistance Appropriation Act of 1976 had barred the use of any of the funds provided for assistance to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. At the same time, however, the MIA issue was evoking congressional interest in contacts with Hanoi and ~~was~~ⁱⁿ such inducements to better behavior as a temporary suspension of the embargo. In response, in March 1976, the administration undertook an exchange with Hanoi, eventuating on November 12 in a meeting in Paris between officers of the American and Vietnamese embassies there. The ice had at least been broken. President Jimmy Carter took office not only with a commitment of his own to normalization but also with an established basis for continued contact.

Its commitment to normalization with Vietnam aside, the Carter Administration entered office as unequipped with a comprehensive Southeast Asian policy as the Ford administration had been in leaving it. Indeed, the dominant impression conveyed by the victorious Democrats--especially to an already apprehensive ASEAN--was of an administration that would give high priority to relations with Vietnam and very little priority, or even attention, to non-Communist Southeast Asia. This, at least, seemed to be the message that was being conveyed by prominent Democrats. In December, for example, Senator Mike Mansfield defining five US objectives in East Asia had cited ~~only~~ two for Southeast Asia; "adjusting to the realities of Indochina" and terminating the US defense commitment to Thailand and US aid as well. [6] Before the election, in a private communication to Carter, Cyrus Vance had given similar emphasis to Vietnam, defining the course that should be adopted there in some detail as compared with cursory mention of the rest of Southeast Asia. [7]

Many who were influential in the administration had been prominent opponents of the war. Ambassador Andrew Young, for example, on the occasion of Hanoi's admission to the United Nations, in what he described as a personal word, reminded the General Assembly that ten years earlier Martin Luther King, whose widow was now a member of the US delegation, had demonstrated against the war in Dag Hammarskjold Plaza while, five years earlier he himself had sponsored legislation cutting off funds for waging the war. [8]

Even among those who did not identify themselves so ardently with the anti-war movement, normalization was seen as a

psychologically helpful symbol of the end of a tragic era and as a way of encouraging Vietnam to concentrate on internal reconstruction and to dilute Soviet influence there. It appeared also that the MIA issue might become less sensitive at home, the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia having concluded in its December 1976 report that "no Americans are still being ^{held} alive as prisoners in Indochina..." and that "a total accounting by the Indochina governments is not possible and should not be expected." [8] There was also considerable optimism that Hanoi would respond to the new administration in a more accommodating manner than it had to its predecessor.

With these anticipations, as one of its earliest East Asian policy moves, the administration in mid-March 1977 despatched a prestigious mission to Hanoi led by President Leonard Woodcock of the United Auto Workers union. The results of the Woodcock mission seemed rather promising. The Vietnamese turned over the remains of eleven Americans and agreed to set up special machinery for acting on MIA information provided by the United States. The mission's report described the Vietnamese as showing interest in the establishment of a new and more friendly relationship and, while clearly expecting a US contribution to their economic reconstruction, flexible about its form and showing understanding of American political constraints. In a subsequent press conference, Carter welcomed this flexibility. However, he was careful to emphasize that, even though an aid and trade relationship could flow from the normalization process, the United States owed Vietnam neither apologies or debts. [10]

The atmosphere still seemed propitious just before the first meeting in Paris in May 1977 between American representatives led by Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke and a Vietnamese delegation led by Vice Foreign Minister Phan Hien. Already committed to supporting Vietnam's admission to the United Nations, Washington had also demonstrated its new attitude by relaxing travel restrictions and licensing private humanitarian organizations to provide some \$5 million in aid to Vietnam. Hanoi, for its part, had signalled its interest in relations with the United States and the West in a number of ways.

Carter administration hopes were soon dashed, however. Not only did Phan Hien quickly raise Vietnam's aid demand in the meeting with Holbrooke. He also reiterated it in a press conference immediately thereafter and it was then underlined by Hanoi radio broadcasts claiming that the United States owed Vietnam \$4.5 million in reparations. A congressional response followed immediately. In the House, an amendment to the State Department authorization bill, passed by a large majority after only ten minutes of debate, prohibited the use of any of the funds provided "for the purpose of negotiating reparations, aid or any other form of payment." A subsequent amendment, originating in the Senate, required American representatives to oppose assistance to Vietnam by international lending institutions. [11]

Two subsequent US-Vietnamese meetings in Paris in June and December 1977 produced no progress. In January 1978 a projected February session was cancelled when the Vietnamese Ambassador to the

United Nations was named as an unindicted conspirator in the David Truong-Ronald Humphrey espionage case and expelled from the United States.

By this time, however, normalization with Vietnam, although it remained an administrative objective, had ceased to be a central preoccupation, becoming only one facet of a broader Southeast Asian strategy centering on a new, more active relationship with ASEAN. The uneasiness of the ASEAN countries not only with Carter administration preoccupation with Vietnam but also with other policies that seemed to them to demonstrate indifference or worse to Asian interests quickly became evident. To their voices were added the more influential ones or equally concerned Japan and Australia. Writing to Secretary of State Vance, Australian Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock argued that the ASEAN countries should not be given the impression that the United States was rewarding their "moderation and a serious effort at self help" with neglect. Instead, he urged the Secretary to envisage using an unusual period of peace in Southeast Asia as an opportune time to strengthen "elements of stability and development." Due attention should be paid to the desirability of persuading the Indochina countries to "put the past behind them." But the balance should always favor ASEAN which should be receiving much more American attention. [12]

The United States had, in fact, been taking favorable notice of ASEAN for some time, but in quite a low key manner that rarely went beyond citing it as one example of the new, favorable trends in East Asia. Thus, in congressional testimony in November 1975, Assistant

Secretary Habib had referred to ASEAN as "a movement which we generally favored although not one in which we need to participate too directly." ~~(HR Press on International Relations, Nov. 10, 1966)~~
 [12] At the time, this somewhat distant view mirrored ASEAN's own. Officially non-aligned it had been clearly anxious, especially in its formative years, not to be caught up in a close US embrace or to justify the characterization as a SEATO in sheep's clothing by which it was initially greeted in Moscow and Beijing.

By 1977, however, ASEAN's view of itself and the way it was perceived elsewhere had both changed. Its first summit meeting at Bali in February 1976 had been a gratifying demonstration of resilience and unity in the face of the new situation in Indochina. Beijing and Moscow had begun to take favorable note of the organization. ASEAN's international ties, developed in the form of economic "dialogues" had been established, first with the smaller Pacific powers--Australia, New Zealand, and Canada--then, after a digestive pause, with the economic great power, Japan. Its second summit in Kuala Lumpur in August 1977 had been followed by meetings there between the ASEAN leaders and their Australian, Japanese and New Zealand counterpart while immediately thereafter in Manila the Fukuda Doctrine had stressed Japan's interest in cooperation with ASEAN.

ASEAN was thus now more confident about undertaking ties with a superpower. At the same time, Carter administration East Asian policy makers saw a relationship with ASEAN as fitting very well into a systematic effort to encourage a new, more positive, American image

of Asia where ^{American} support for economic and social progress would replace the military-security emphasis of the past.

Rhetorical emphasis on economic cooperation notwithstanding, the meeting in Manila in September 1977 that inaugurated the US-ASEAN dialogue relationship produced little of the kind. Indeed, in this and subsequent meetings, the United States found itself unable to respond positively to ASEAN positions stemming from North-South considerations--support for commodity funds and the like--or from desires for preferential treatment. However, as visits and meetings multiplied, the importance of ASEAN was given more symbolic weight and dealings with it began to involve a fairly wide range of official and other Americans. This was particularly the case with Vice-President Walter Mondale's visit to the region in May 1978. Although not all of the ASEAN countries were included on his itinerary the trip was billed as an ASEAN-focussed event, and the customary elaborate preparations helped to institutionalize the regional organization's new place in American foreign policy.

The locus of the second US-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Washington in August 1978 also facilitated emphasis on the importance the US now placed on the relationship. The presence of Secretary of State Vance and six other US Cabinet members and a warm reception in the White House and on the Hill added a good deal to the political symbolism of the meeting, as did the fact that it provided the occasion for Secretary Vance to announce US support for a major ASEAN objective, the Common Fund. At the same time, the United States was confirming its continued strategic interest in non-Communist

Southeast Asia. Grant military assistance was retained for Thailand and Indonesia in the FY ¹⁹⁷⁸ budget despite initial strong Congressional opposition. The Vice President's trip had provided the occasion for reaffirming the United States commitment to the defense of Thailand as a bilateral as well as multilateral obligation under the Manila Pact--the first public statement of this commitment at so high a level since the end of the Indochina War. In addition, he had assured both the Thai and the Indonesians that the US would remain a reliable supplier of military equipment. Earlier doubts about the wisdom of seeking to retain the American bases in the Philippines had been resolved and a visit by Assistant Secretary Holbrooke to Manila late in 1977 had provided the impetus for renewed negotiations completed successfully at the end of 1978.

Meanwhile, interest in normalizing with Vietnam continued. In congressional testimony in March 1978 Holbrooke described the previous year as having produced "some slight but significant improvement in relations between the United States and Vietnam." [13] In May, Hanoi's acceptance of a long-standing American proposal that a Vietnamese expert team visit an American MIA identification facility in Hawaii seemed to open up the prospect of some progress on this issue. Even so, when in July the Vietnamese began to drop hints to foreign diplomats, journalists, and congressional visitors that they were prepared to forego their demands for aid and enter into diplomatic relations without preconditions, the atmosphere was far different from what it had been in the spring of 1977.

While in Asia antagonism between Hanoi and Beijing had been steadily rising, in Washington in the internal administration struggle over control of China policy, the advantage now rested with the NSC and national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. At the heart of the differences between Vance and Brzezinski on China's place in American foreign policy were crucially opposing views over the management of the US-Soviet-Chinese triangle. The bitterness of the struggle as the participants have subsequently described it reflected not only the grave importance of the central questions at issue, but also the peculiar mystique that had come to surround China policy and its control since the secret Kissinger mission of 1971. And Vietnam had become inescapably part of the problem as Hanoi's relations with China deteriorated and its ties to the Soviet Union grew closer.

As early as January 1978, with escalating hostilities on the Vietnamese border attracting international attention, Brzezinski had identified Vietnam as a Soviet surrogate. Visiting Beijing in May, he found the Chinese quick to denounce Vietnamese perfidy; within a month the Chinese were publicly describing Vietnam as the Asian Cuba. By July, Brzezinski was pointing to the sensitive state of normalization negotiations with the PRC, now targeted for completion by December 15, as a reason for postponing normalization with Hanoi.

In the continuing debate, Vietnam's own actions were adding weight to the arguments for delay. In March, the draconian measures employed to enforce the abolition of private trade put an end to expectations of a gradualist economic policy in the interests of the

West to support. More portentously, it precipitated the boat people exodus. The astoundingly high levels of 75,000 a month were not to be reached until early in 1979. But even in May the refugee influx had begun to cause problems for ASEAN countries and to require American policy responses as reflected in the Vice-President's announcement in Bangkok that the United States would accept an additional 25,000 refugees from Southeast Asia annually and would provide up to \$2 million to the Thai government to support the development of longer-term plans for refugee resettlement. Mounting numbers attracted increasingly unfavorable attention to Hanoi's policies, particularly as evidence accumulated that Vietnamese officials were not only forcing ethnic Chinese to leave but also to pay for the privilege of doing so.

Of growing concern also was the developing relationship between Hanoi and Moscow. Vietnam's abandonment in June of its earlier resistance to joining Comecon, despite Soviet pressures, was seen as strong, although not yet conclusive, evidence of an alliance in the making. Massive Soviet arms deliveries in the summer of 1978 pointed in the same direction while the Soviet-Vietnamese Friendship Treaty of November 3, 1978 made it even more difficult to argue that a diplomatic relationship with Washington could be a strong counterweight to a mutually supportive Hanoi-Moscow tie.

Much earlier, however, the tide had begun to move decisively in favor of postponement. On September 27 when Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach finally gave official confirmation to Hanoi's willingness to abandon its preconditions, Holbrooke,

meeting with him in New York, was unable to respond positively. In mid-October the President had accepted Brezhnev's recommendation to postpone--whether for wholly China reasons or also because of concerns over the impact of still another destabilizing foreign policy move on the November elections remaining a matter of some dispute. [14] Be that as it may, since the President's decision to postpone by no means precluded resuming negotiations with Hanoi in 1979, State Department examination of the modalities of an eventual relationship continued. In December, however, the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia put an end to prospects that, once diplomatic relations with Beijing were established, normalization negotiations with Hanoi would resume.

After Cambodia, 1979-1987

Since the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, the United States has defined withdrawal of Vietnamese troops and a political settlement as prerequisites for normalization. Official American contacts with Hanoi have been confined to refugee and MIA matters. Otherwise, the US relationship with Hanoi has taken the form of American participation with ASEAN in pressures on Vietnam directed toward inducing it to agree to withdraw its forces from Cambodia and to a political solution there reflecting the freely expressed will of Cambodia's people and ensuring Cambodian neutrality. Not only because of cooperation on Indochina issues, including refugee problems as well as the hostilities, but also because of a burgeoning

economic relationship and the proliferation of other contacts and common interests and ties, the US-ASEAN relationship has solidified still further. In the public arena, frequent tribute is paid to ASEAN strengths and cohesion as key factors in maintaining resistance to Vietnamese aggression and, more broadly, as making important contributions to the maintenance of American security interests in East Asia and the Pacific.

The United States has seen considerable advantage in supporting ASEAN positions and leadership on Cambodian issues rather than seeking to play the dominant role. Because a strong and self-confident ASEAN is important to the United States, the prestige ASEAN has gained from its generally skillful exercise of leadership is an American as well as ASEAN asset. Any danger that US involvement in the Third Indochina War might be seen at home as likely to result in replaying the Second has been all but eliminated by the American low posture. ASEAN leadership has also facilitated the mobilization of Third World support behind pressures on Vietnam to withdraw. And, it is probably fair to say that ASEAN has been able to deal with both Hanoi and the resistance to Hanoi with a degree of subtlety and desirable ambiguity that does not come easily to the United States.

Nevertheless, as the Cambodian stalemate has remained unbroken, some differences have arisen between the United States and ASEAN. One of these revolves around possible conflict between US China interests and American support for ASEAN. This concern arose most directly in the first year of the Ronald Reagan presidency. ASEAN alarmed by the progress toward a US-China military alliance that

Secretary of State Alexander Haig's June 1981 visit to China seemed to portend. ASEAN reacted with dismay to the US position at the International Conference on Kampuchea (ICC) held the next month in New York. The ASEAN approach called for strong barriers in any settlement agreement against the return to power of Beijing's Khmer Rouge proteges and for a more conciliatory approach to Vietnam than the Chinese at that time were willing to entertain. To ASEAN representatives, their failure to prevail seemed attributable to US support for the PRC position; they remained unconvinced by protestations that the United States had merely tried to steer a middle course and prevent the conference from breaking up over questions that could be deferred to what was probably a distant future. Since then, the official Chinese position has come much closer to ASEAN's. Even so, the ASEAN countries remain apprehensive that, in some future difference with the PRC over Cambodia, the United States will again side with the Chinese. At the same time, they complain that the United States does not take sufficient advantage of its supportive relations with Beijing to induce the Chinese to alter their policies toward Vietnam in ways that might help break the Cambodian deadlock.

ASEAN approaches to the Khmer resistance factions have also posed policy problems for the United States. It has been much easier for ASEAN ^{than for the US} to express strong opposition to Pol Pot's return to power and then set the issue aside and accept the Khmer Rouge as an inescapable part of the anti-Vietnamese alliance. As long as the Cambodian seat in the UN remained an issue, the United States stood

with ASEAN in voting for its retention by the UN. But it was extremely uncomfortable in doing so. And its continuing discomfort with the Khmer Rouge role in the opposition coalition was responsible for its cool response to the CGDK eight point negotiating proposal of March 1985 calling for the establishment of a quadripartite coalition government.

At the same time, however, the United States has been reluctant to respond to ASEAN pressures for supplementing American humanitarian aid to the non-Communist Khmer resistance with military assistance. In an interesting reversal of position⁹ on support for freedom fighters, Congressman Stephen Solarz was responsible for initiating legislative provisions for such assistance which the administration initially opposed. Secretary of State George Schultz in Kuala Lumpur in July 1985 declared that the United States saw no special need for American assistance of this kind, finding a better role in providing food, clothing, medicine and other supplies which "people need as much as they need guns." Arguing that over the long run humanitarian aid might be more sustainable, he warned his ASEAN audience that "Congress is a very changeable operation. They're in favor of something at one time and then some things can happen and they change their mind." [15] The legislation as it emerged from Congress in August did no more than authorize assistance of up to \$5 million annually with no reference to what might be provided. Thus far, the military assistance provided under the Solarz amendment has been limited to training programs and "non-lethal" equipment.

Meanwhile, the principal US negotiating contact with Vietnam has been on MIA issues. There the tone has been set largely by choices in Hanoi. For some years, intermittent indications that Hanoi was adopting a more cooperative attitude tended to be followed by disappointing performance. Since mid-1985, however, Hanoi's behavior has been more consistently cooperative. In August, a meeting with Vietnamese officials was described by an American participant as the "most substantive and productive" yet held. "remarkable for the absolute absence of any linkage whatsoever to larger political issues." [16] Arrangements made in 1985 for joint excavation of a B-52 crash site were implemented in 1986. Also in 1986, further discussion of Hanoi's 1985 proposal for resolving the MIA issue in two years produced an exchange of plans of work and new formal commitments by both sides: the United States to provide material assistance in support of further excavations and other such activities; Vietnam to permit American experts to accompany its own on excavations in accessible areas.

The United States has continued to insist that the MIA problem is a humanitarian one to be kept quite separate from the normalization question which, other issues aside, cannot take place without an acceptable settlement in Cambodia. However, in 1985 congressional testimony, Assistant Secretary of State Paul Wolfowitz noted that a resolution of the MIA issue would "improve the atmosphere" making it "a lot easier for the United States to play a role" in such a settlement. [17] To date, despite the improved atmosphere, progress toward resolution has continued slowly. The

remains and information turned over by the Vietnamese in 1986 reduced only slightly the US count of missing in action or otherwise unaccounted for from 1797 at the beginning of 1986 to 1785 in November.

Opportunities Missed: 1977-1978

That the SRV missed an opportunity to normalize relations in 1977 is incontestable. That the United States missed such an opportunity in mid-1978 is arguable. That, had normalization been accomplished in 1977, the subsequent course of events would have been markedly altered is at least possible; normalization in mid-1978 or later in the year would have been most unlikely to alter the course of events in any significant way.

Given the strength of American emotions on reparations, emotions that cut right across the political spectrum, normalization was impossible as long as Hanoi insisted on this precondition. Had Hanoi recognized this and abandoned its preconditions in response to a new well-intentioned administration normalization would almost certainly have followed. While active proponents of this course outside the administration were few in number, neither were active opponents numerous. Moreover, this early in its term, the administration could count on considerable leeway for foreign policy initiatives. The MIA issue would probably have been manageable, especially with a little more finesse on Hanoi's part; there was support on the Hill for increased contacts as a way of resolving the problem that could have

counteracted opposing demands for a full accounting as a precondition to normalization.

The international circumstances were also propitious. Hanoi could not yet be tagged as a member of the Soviet bloc: it still seemed to be seeking some balance in its relations with Moscow and Beijing and for more active relations with the West. The Chinese, still trying to steer something of a middle course between Cambodia and Vietnam, were conveying to American interlocutors ^{their} support for US-Vietnamese normalization as a way of reducing Moscow's opportunities to draw Hanoi into its orbit. ASEAN, although concerned over what seemed to be an excessive American focus on former enemies at the expense of old friends, nevertheless favored an American-Vietnamese relationship (if not carried too far) as hopefully encouraging Hanoi toward moderation domestically and in its relations with its neighbors.

It is at least possible that normalization in 1977, especially if it had come early in the year, might have had some influence on the subsequent course of events. Improved prospects for trade and investment from the US and the West might have strengthened trends toward moderation in Vietnamese economic policy. If so, this might have given Vietnam's overseas Chinese commercial class more breathing space, removing one irritant--although others would have remained--from relations between Hanoi and Beijing. It might also have resulted in a greater variety of profitable ties between Vietnam and non-Communist countries the desire to maintain which might have deferred open aggression: here, however, the customary expectations

of national leaders that they can eat their cake and have it too must be factored in. Another important shadow on this optimistic scenario is the unlikelihood that the mere opening of diplomatic relations between Washington and Hanoi would have given the Khmer Rouge reason to abandon their suicidally provocative course. Khmer Rouge persistence in turn would have confronted the PRC and Vietnam with dilemmas the response to which would have been dictated by vital security concerns for which the United States had neither responsibility nor remedies.

The Vietnamese clearly missed an opportunity in 1977; the United States may have missed an opportunity in mid-1978. Had Washington responded immediately to Hanoi's hints of July and had Hanoi immediately made its position official, the path toward normalization might at least have been less obstructed than it was to become later in the year. The argument for counteracting Soviet influence through normalization with Hanoi might have been more persuasive while the significance of Hanoi's membership in COCOM was still debatable. Brezhnev was already on the other side, but he had not yet persuaded the president who was only beginning to face the foreign policy difficulties--heightening opposition to SALT II, Soviet adventurism in Africa, the collapse of the Shah, and the like--that mounted as the mid-term elections approached.

But a normalization process set in train in mid-1978 almost certainly would not have altered the view already prevailing in Hanoi that Vietnamese security required the extirpation of the Pol Pot regime. Nor could it have altered the conclusion that had been made

so inescapable by the fratricidal purge in Cambodia's East Zone in May and June, and by other events as well, the conclusion that, although a Khmer cover was desirable, if Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge were to be eliminated as quickly and completely as Vietnamese security interests required, a major and conspicuous PAVN involvement would be inevitable. Indeed, all of the evidence so brilliantly marshalled by Nayan Chanda in Brother Enemy points to the conclusion that, when Hanoi reached out to the United States and ASEAN in mid-1978, it had in mind no more than the hope of moderating their reactions (and perhaps Beijing's) to an already determined course of action.

As much in July as in September the principal contenders were embarked on a collision course. The Vietnamese had already begun to call for the overthrow of the Pol Pot regime and to organize the force that was to be surfaced in November as the KNUFNS (Khmer National United Front for National Salvation). The Chinese had made their last attempt to induce caution in Phnom Penh at the beginning of the year with Deng Ying-chao's visit. This failing, they had thrown their support unequivocally behind Pol Pot both in public statements and in supplying military equipment. Beijing's denunciations of Vietnam to domestic and foreign audiences were being reciprocated by Hanoi which, in July, identified the PRC as the main culprit behind Cambodia's provocations. Moscow, with perceived dangers of hostile encirclement increasing, was all the more anxious to consolidate its relationship with Hanoi as the militant Brezhnev line seemed to be taking possession of American China policy and the

Japanese agreed to an anti-hegemony clause in their August 1978 Peace and Friendship Treaty with China. Moscow's payment for the new alliance even before it was formalized in November began in August with a massive arms airlift to Vietnam.

New Opportunities Today?

In many ways, American policy toward Vietnam and its Cambodian venture has been eminently successful. It has been pursued consistently and steadily by two administrations. It has been either ignored by the general public or accepted with approval. It has not precipitated significant conflict between the executive and legislative branches or caused major struggles within the executive branch. These are perhaps negative virtues. On the positive side, it has strengthened the US-ASEAN relationship and avoided a clash of views with Beijing in an area of much more immediate concern to the PRC than to the US. And, in the UN, it has brought the United States into a rather rare alliance with a large majority of Third World countries.

In the Indochina theatre, its accomplishments have been less weighty. Its support of ASEAN-organized pressures has been an important factor in obstructing Hanoi's achievement of international recognition for its puppet regime. Its avowed commitment to Thailand's security and its military assistance have contributed to the pressures on Hanoi for caution on the Thai-Cambodian border, although Chinese policy constitutes a more important deterrent. But

There seem no greater prospects today than there were ten years ago
 in Hanoi's agreement to a genuine military withdrawal and a
 political solution along the lines advanced by ASEAN. And,
 meanwhile, the utilization by the Russians of their military
 lodgement in Vietnam continues to increase.

These disadvantages do not seem to weigh very heavily either
 with the administration or with the general public. They do,
 however, prompt occasional criticism, usually in articles in learned
 journals, describing American policy as excessively supine, in the
 words of one writer as "A Case of Strategic Surrender." [18]

Although the prescriptions critics offer for change may vary,
 their analyses of the principal factors in the situation and the
 obstacles to settlement are markedly similar and do not differ
 radically from those of supporters of present policy. Chinese policy
 and Chinese-Vietnamese relations are almost universally seen as
 constituting the most significant factor in the Cambodian equation.
 Most regard Chinese assent^{as}_A essential to the survival of any
 settlement. Soviet support as an important contribution to Hanoi's
 obduracy. In the view of most, deadlock persists in part because
 China and the Soviet Union both prefer the present situation to any
 alternative they can envisage: they do not find the costs excessive;
 neither is likely to permit Cambodia to become an obstacle to
 mutually profitable understandings on other matters; and the USSR,
 although it would probably welcome a more conciliatory policy on
 Hanoi's part, will not risk its military access to Vietnam by
 pressing for changes in Cambodian policy.

ASEAN expectations of the results of its pressures are criticized as unrealistic. Hanoi is seen as unwilling to jeopardize its control of Cambodia by any real concessions, at least as long as its confrontation with Beijing persists. Military pressures are not seen as achieving a decisive outcome for either side: Hanoi cannot be expelled by the anti-Vietnamese guerrillas but, although it can contain them, it cannot eliminate them.

The advantages and dangers of the present situation are also seen similarly. The advantages cited include the greater integration of ASEAN that its Cambodian response has brought about, the consolidation of the US-ASEAN relationship, the avoidance by the Southeast Asian contenders of total confrontation. The disadvantages most emphasized by those who would encourage some change in American policy are the opportunities the present situation provides for undue Soviet and/or Chinese influence in the region. Others cited include the continued polarization of Southeast Asia; the still explosive potential of great power involvement; the dangers to Thailand--on the one hand, a Vietnamese attack, on the other hand, interruption of present trends toward civilian, constitutional government; and the danger to ASEAN of continued differences between Thailand and Indonesia over how the situation should be handled.

Clearly critics of American policy appreciate the intractability of the causes of the long-standing stalemate. But they glimpse opportunities in Hanoi's resentment of its dependence on Moscow and in its intermittent suspicions that Moscow once again is about to abandon Vietnam; in indications that Hanoi is now giving more serious

and realistic attention to its grievous economic problems; and in prospects that out of PRC/Soviet discussions might come some shift, as yet very dimly seen, in the relations between China and Vietnam.

Most prescriptions for new or altered American policies look to initiatives intended to improve the prospects for breaking the present stalemate and bringing the war to an end. Others, however, look to an increase in American pressures which, while they may prolong the war, will increase the costs to Vietnam and add to the prospects for a more satisfactory solution in the long run.

The prescriptions of those who advocate the latter course center on the provision of US military assistance to the non-Communist elements of the Khmer resistance. However, expectations that the United States can aid the resistance to the point where military victory might be in its grasp do not seem to play any part in this proposal. Rather, the argument in favor rests in part on the utility of increasing pressures on Hanoi. Even more, however, and in line with some ASEAN views, American military assistance is advocated as a way of balancing both Khmer Rouge and Chinese roles. US military assistance will improve the non-Communists' morale, their ability to attract recruits, and their fighting strength thereby improving their ability to compete with the Khmer Rouge now, and later to frustrate their attempts to dominate or even participate in a coalition government. Similarly, the United States through its larger role would gain a better comparative position vis a vis the PRC in efforts to influence the course of events.

Those who advocate a more vigorous American effort to bring the war to an end generally link a more conciliatory posture toward Vietnam with new diplomatic pressures on ASEAN and China. Normalization with Hanoi is urged as a way of encouraging Vietnam to compromise since it will now have access to western aid and trade which will also enable it to distance itself from the USSR. At the same time Vietnam's fears of an independent Cambodia as a threat to its security can be reduced by persuading ASEAN to abandon its support for the resistance and China to recognize that its policies serve only to drive Vietnam more securely into the Soviet embrace to the detriment of both Chinese and American interests. The impact of this mix of inducements to Hanoi and pressures on others will then serve to convince Hanoi that the other actors concerned have recognized Vietnamese legitimate interests in Cambodia to the point where these interests no longer need protection by an army of occupation and a puppet government and where Vietnam's subordinate relationship to the Soviet Union need be tolerated no longer.

As Michael Leiter has commented "In ideal terms, of course, it is not difficult to suggest a formula for peace." But, as he adds "to state that formula is only to state the fundamental problem is facile as well as in ideal terms." [19] From the policy maker more is required, not merely general prescriptions for change but also

answers to hard questions about obstacles, risks, and sources of leverage. Two particularly difficult ones concern:

- the ^{efficacy} ~~effectiveness~~ of normalization as an inducement to changed behavior on Vietnam's part with respect either to Cambodia or to the USSR when it is demonstrably beyond the range of possibility that the United States can even begin to replace the Soviet Union as a source of economic support or protection.
- the nature of the inducements that might persuade the Chinese to alter a policy toward Hanoi which they are convinced will succeed over the longer run and meanwhile protects their perceived interests at low cost.

Footnotes

1. Text in Pacific Community; Vol. 11, No. 3, April 1971, p. 615.
2. House of Representatives. International Relations Committee. The Vietnam-Cambodia Emergency. April 1975. Part 11, p. 244.
3. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Southeast Asian Affairs. 1975. (Singapore, 1976). p. 286.
4. Department of State Bulletin. July 7, 1975. p. 4.
5. House of Representatives. International Relations Committee. Special Subcommittee on US Policies in Southeast Asia. Hearings. Sept. 26, 1976. p. 6.
6. Mike Mansfield. Charting a New Course (Charles E. Tuttle: Rutland, Vermont, 1978). p. 86.
7. Cyrus Vance. Hard Choices (Simon & Schuster: New York, 1983). pp. 443, 444, 450.
8. citation to be provided.
9. Nayan Chanda. Brother Enemy (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1986). p. 146.
10. Department of State Bulletin. April 18, 1977. pp. 359-374.
11. Joseph J. Zasloff and MacAlister Brown. Communist Indochina and US Foreign Policy: Postwar Realities (Westview Press: Boulder, 1978). pp. 23-25.
12. The Australian Financial Review. October 4, 1977.
- 12a See below
13. House of Representatives. International Relations Committee. Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific. Hearings on the Foreign Assistance Act of 1979. p. 108.
14. See Chanda. op.cit.. Ch. IX.
15. The Washington Post. July 11, 1985.
16. Ibid.. August 31, 1985.
17. Department of State. Bureau of Public Affairs. Current Policy. No. 719.
18. Leszek Buszyński. "The United States and Southeast Asia: Case of Strategic Surrender." Journal of Southeast Asian Studies. Vol. XIV, No. 2, September 1984.
19. Letter. op.cit.. p. 36.

2a House of Representatives, International Relations Committee, Hearings before the Subcommittee on

All part of Gordon 18

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